

## Called By a New Name

Today we finally reach the end of the long journey we've been on with our ancestors in faith. We have heard about God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, a promise that included descendants and a land to call home, as well as God's promise that "I will be your God and you will be my people". We've heard about the birth of Isaac, Abraham's son, and his marriage to Rebekah. We've followed the story of Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, and of Jacob's marriages and the births of his twelve sons. Last week, we heard the story of Jacob's wrestling match with a stranger and his reconciliation with his brother. Today we finally come to the place where we leave the story of this family for a while, although it's a story that never really ends, as the chain of ancestors in faith continues unbroken even until today.

As we pick up the story, Jacob is on the way back to Bethel, a place name that literally means House of God. It's the place where, years ago, Jacob stopped for a night when he was on the run from his brother after tricking his brother out of his father's blessing, the place where, with a pillow for his head, Jacob had his first vision of angels traveling up and down a ladder between earth and heaven, and in that vision, heard God promise him for the first time the things God had promised his grandfather Abraham, land for his descendants, with the added promise that God would go with him wherever he went, and the promise that God would bring him home. On that night, Jacob set up the rock that had been his pillow as a pillar to mark the place and promised that if God would keep God's side of the bargain, Jacob would keep his, and tithe ten percent on top of it.

This morning's story happens many years later. Jacob is no longer a rash young man. He is married – twice – has kids, at least thirteen of them, and is well off. God calls him back to Bethel, the first place Jacob met God. The scene has the sense of wrapping up one chapter of life before heading on to something new. It is a time for worship that marks the turning season of a life.

We have markers for the turning points in our lives too. There are baby showers and birthday parties, graduations and weddings, anniversaries and retirement parties. In our new hymnal, there's even a section for hymns "Celebrating Time". Sometimes those markers for the changes time brings are public with big parties and lots of people. Sometimes they are more private, with rituals and symbols known only to ourselves. One friend does a life-inventory each year on her birthday, looking back on where she's been and setting goals for the year ahead. Another friend visits his father's grave on the anniversary of his death.

Sometimes we, like Jacob, mark the important transitions of life in worship. For us Christians, the most important of all those markers is our baptism. Our baptism is the starting place for all the other steps we take in Christian life, as we are confirmed, as we join a new congregation, as we are ordained to Christ's ministry as deacons, elders and ministers. In baptism we leave behind an old way of life, renounce the powers of evil, are washed clean and clothed in the garments of a new way of life. In baptism, we receive the new name of "child of God".

Jacob's trip to Bethel looks like baptism in many ways. He tells the people traveling with him to renounce and set aside any other gods and purify themselves, putting on clean clothes. And when they come to Bethel, God gives Jacob a new name. He is no longer Jacob, the grabber, but Israel, the one who wrestles with God.

Because in our tradition we ordinarily baptize babies, we sometimes miss the huge change that baptism marks between what was and what will be. The writer of 1 Peter puts it this way: "Once, you were no people. Now, you are God's people. Once, you had not received mercy. Now, you have received mercy."

At a conference years ago, I heard an African-American preacher speak about what those words had meant to her people as they came to know Jesus

even while they were still enslaved. They knew what it was to be no people. In the census, each slave counted as 1/3 of a person. They could be sold for cash or for a cow. They had no rights of their own. In the eyes of many, they were less than human. Yet because of Jesus, in their baptism they became God's own people, given a new name, "child of God", full citizens in the kingdom of God. They had a heritage that was greater than any human heritage, riches that could not be counted in dollars and cents. They had been set free, named and called by God. They could stand up straight and walk proud. Once they were no people, now they were God's people.

When God gives Jacob his new name, a similar transition takes place. Since he was born, Jacob had always seen himself as being in second place. He came out of Rebekah's womb grabbing Esau's foot, trying to pull Esau back so he could be first. And so he got his name, Jacob, the grasper. All the way through life, there was Esau, just one step in front of him. All the way through life, there was Jacob, grabbing and maneuvering to catch up and move ahead. The birthright belonged to Esau as first-born son, until Jacob made a deal to take it from him. Isaac's blessing belonged to Esau – until Jacob tricked him out of it. As Jacob prospered during his stay with Laban, so Esau prospered in his brother's absence. It was Esau, still acting like the older brother, who welcomed Jacob home. Yet now, here, at last, at Bethel, Jacob finally realizes that he, and not Esau, is the heir of God's promise to their ancestors. Here, at last, he is given a new name, a name that doesn't belong to someone who is always in second place, a name that will become the name of a people and a nation. Israel.

In baptism, God re-names each one of us. We are not what we once were, a second-class person, not worth much in our own eyes or in the way others measure us. We become a child of God, named and chosen for God's purpose. Each one of us becomes a person of infinite worth, valued so much that Jesus would even give his life for us. We are set free to leave the past

behind and move into a new future, living into that name of “child of God, heir of God’s promises”. That new name marks us for the rest of our lives.

Sometimes we forget our baptism. The battering of the world tarnishes our new name, blocks it out. We are called other names that belittle us, make us smaller, and we lose track of the fact that we are children of God. It is said that Martin Luther, in the midst of all the abuse and challenges he faced, when he was on the edge of giving up, used to touch his forehead and say, “I am baptized.” Maybe that’s a practice we should all take on. For no matter what your past has been, you have been named and claimed by God as God’s own beloved child. “Once, you were no people. Now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy. Now you have received mercy.” Thanks be to God.